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ABSTRACT

Noting that the inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood programs has important short-term behavioral and social benefits for such children and their families and that arguments for an "ethic of inclusion" have emerged within the field, this paper maintains that much remains to be learned about the nature of early childhood inclusion. The paper notes that potentially important differences between programs involved in research and community-based preschool programs limit the ecological validity of much of the extant research on early childhood inclusion. Ecobehavioral assessment is described as one systematic approach to obtaining specific environmental and behavioral information about children's experiences in community-based early childhood programs. The paper then describes a multi-site, ecobehavioral investigation to assess the nature of preschool children's experiences in inclusive programs. Participating were 112 preschoolers with and without disabilities in 16 community-based, inclusive preschool programs in four states. The study found that children with and without disabilities exhibited similar child behaviors and were meaningfully engaged in a variety of adult-and child-initiated activities within similar activity contexts. Children without disabilities participated in more child-child social behaviors than did children with disabilities and also received less adult support and attention. These findings suggest that additional focused intervention efforts are necessary to promote and support peer interactions and social networks within inclusive preschools. A second study is also described, which examined levels of engagement in children with and without disabilities in adult- and child-initiated activities. That study found that children with and without disabilities had similar levels of engagement, were engaged more often in child- than adult-initiated activities, and were engaged in different types of child behavior when adults and children initiated activities. (Contains 33 references.) (KB)

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Title of Presentation: "Reflections on Community-based Inclusive Preschools"

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During the last 20 years, early childhood inclusion has been a widely discussed placement strategy for young children with disabilities (e.g., Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998; Odom et al., 1996; Peck, Odom, & Bricker, 1993; Wolery et al., 1993). Inclusion of young children with disabilities has had legal (e.g., Public Law 102-119 and 105-17), scientific (e.g., Buysse & Bailey, 1993; Lamorey & Bricker, 1993; Odom & McEvoy, 1988), and public policy support (e.g., Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; DEC Task Force on Recommended Practices, 1993). Researchers who have conducted comprehensive examinations of the effectiveness of early childhood inclusion have concluded that inclusion has important short-term behavioral and social, but not necessarily long-term intellectual and developmental, benefits for young children with disabilities and their families (Buysse & Bailey, 1993; Lamorey & Bricker, 1993, Odom & McEvoy, 1988). Many demonstrations of the effectiveness of inclusive early childhood programs have been presented in the professional literature (e.g., Brown, Horn, Heiser, & Odom, 1996; Fox, Dunlap, & Philbrick, 1997; Peck, Killen, & Baumgart, 1989; Rule et al., 1987), and the number of well-specified strategies for supporting inclusive practices has proliferated in both the early childhood and early childhood special education literatures (e.g., Allen & Schwartz, 1996; Brown & Conroy, 1997a; Cook, Tessier, & Klein, 1996; Wolery & Wilbers, 1994). Indeed, given current programmatic evidence and the contemporary

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Zeitgeist for inclusion, New and Mallory (1994) argued that an "ethic of inclusion" has emerged within early childhood education.

Past discussions of and contemporary recommendations for inclusion of young children with disabilities notwithstanding, much remains to be learned about the nature of early childhood inclusion (Kontos et al., 1998; Odom et al., 1996). Much of the previous research concerning early childhood inclusion has been characterized by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) indictment of developmental psychology, in which "...the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (p. 19) has predominated. For example, in their review, Buysse and Bailey (1993) identified 22 methodically rigorous investigations of early childhood inclusion. The reviewers noted, however, that most of the studies were conducted in programs that were: (a) university-based programs; (b) had low teacher to child ratios; and (c) often enrolled more children with disabilities than children without disabilities. Most often, conditions and services in university-based preschool programs have been in sharp contrast to the conditions and services that typify many community-based preschool programs (e.g., child care centers, Head Start Programs, not-for-profit and for-profit preschools, and public school preschools). Specifically, most community-based preschool programs have had: (a) only a few children with disabilities in each program; (b) higher teacher to child ratios; and (c) fewer specialized and related services (e.g., speech and language therapy, physical therapy) (Wolery et al., 1993). These potentially important programmatic differences have limited the ecological validity of much of the extant research on early childhood inclusion, at least with respect to generalizatibilty to inclusion issues in many community-based programs.

Given that annually, slightly more than 50% of the preschoolers with disabilities have been served in inclusive preschools (United States Department of Education, 1999) and that the majority those programs have been community-based, explicit descriptions of young children's experiences in community-based, inclusive preschools have been sorely needed to inform our understanding of early childhood inclusion (Kontos et al., 1998; Odom et al., 1996). Although previous research has provided a foundation, conducting a new generation of applied research in typical community contexts may generate important information about specific processes and programmatic outcomes that affect the success or failure of preschool inclusion.

One systematic approach to obtaining specific environmental and behavioral information about young children's experiences within early childhood programs has been ecobehavioral assessment (Carta, Sainato, & Greenwood, 1988). Ecobehavioral assessment has been defined as "...environment-behavior interactions and the ecological contexts of students' behaviors" (Greenwood, Carta, Kamps, & Arreaga-Mayer, 1990, p. 36). Given that children's daily interactions within preschool programs may affect their development, examinations of ecobehavioral relationships have broadened our understanding of environmental circumstances that might influence young children's behavior and subsequent development within early childhood programs (Carta et al., 1988). Ecobehavioral assessment has been employed in several studies in the last 15 years. Investigators have used ecobehavioral assessments to: (a) evaluate the effectiveness of early childhood programs (Carta, Greenwood, & Robinson, 1987); (b) investigate children's transitions between early childhood settings (Carta, Atwater, Schwartz, & Miller, 1990); (c) examine the use of language intervention strategies in preschools (Schwartz, Carta, & Grant, 1996); (d) identify

activities that set the occasion for child-child social interaction in early childhood and early childhood special education programs (Odom, Peterson, McConnell, & Ostrosky, 1990); and (e) describe classroom practices and child behavior in early childhood education and early childhood special education settings (Odom, Skellenger, & Ostrosky, 1999).

We conducted a multi-site, ecobehavioral investigation to describe the nature of preschool children's experiences in inclusive early childhood programs (Brown, Odom, Li, & Zercher, 1999). The momentary time-sampling information reported from the study represents 3 hours of observational data per child for 112 preschoolers with and without disabilities in 16 community-based, inclusive preschool programs in 4 states. In general, children with and without disabilities exhibited similar child behaviors and were meaningfully engaged in a variety of adult- and child-initiated activities within similar activity contexts. Two noteworthy between-group differences were that (a) children without disabilities, compared to those with disabilities, participated in more child-child social behaviors and (b) children with disabilities received more adult support and attention than peers without disabilities. The ecobehavioral data from this study begin to " paint a portrait" of preschool inclusion. The "portrait" revealed that children with disabilities were physically included in their preschool programs. Nevertheless, the "portrait" also suggested that if social integration of young children with and without disabilities is a primary goal of preschool inclusion, then additional, focused intervention efforts may be required to establish socially inclusive programs for young children with and without disabilities. Specifically, teachers ought to implement social competence interventions to promote and support young children's peer interactions and social networks within inclusive preschools (cf. Brown & Conroy, 1997b).

In our program of research, we also addressed a second set of questions that related to the engagement of young children with and with disabilities in inclusive preschools. In early childhood education, many professionals have assumed that child-initiation will result in children's engagement. In early childhood special education, however, many professionals have been concerned that children's developmental delays may necessitate explicit adult facilitation to promote and support children's engagement in preschool activities. In a second study, we examined the levels of engagement of children with and without disabilities when adults initiated activities and when children initiated activities. We found that children with and without disabilities (a) had similar levels of overall engagement, (b) were engaged more often when children rather than adults initiated activities, and (c) were engaged in different types of child behavior when adults and children initiated activities (Brown & Odom, 1999). Additional research on what programmatic factors that promote children's engagement, particularly social engagement, in meaningful preschool activities is sorely needed to inform our understanding of preschool inclusion.

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